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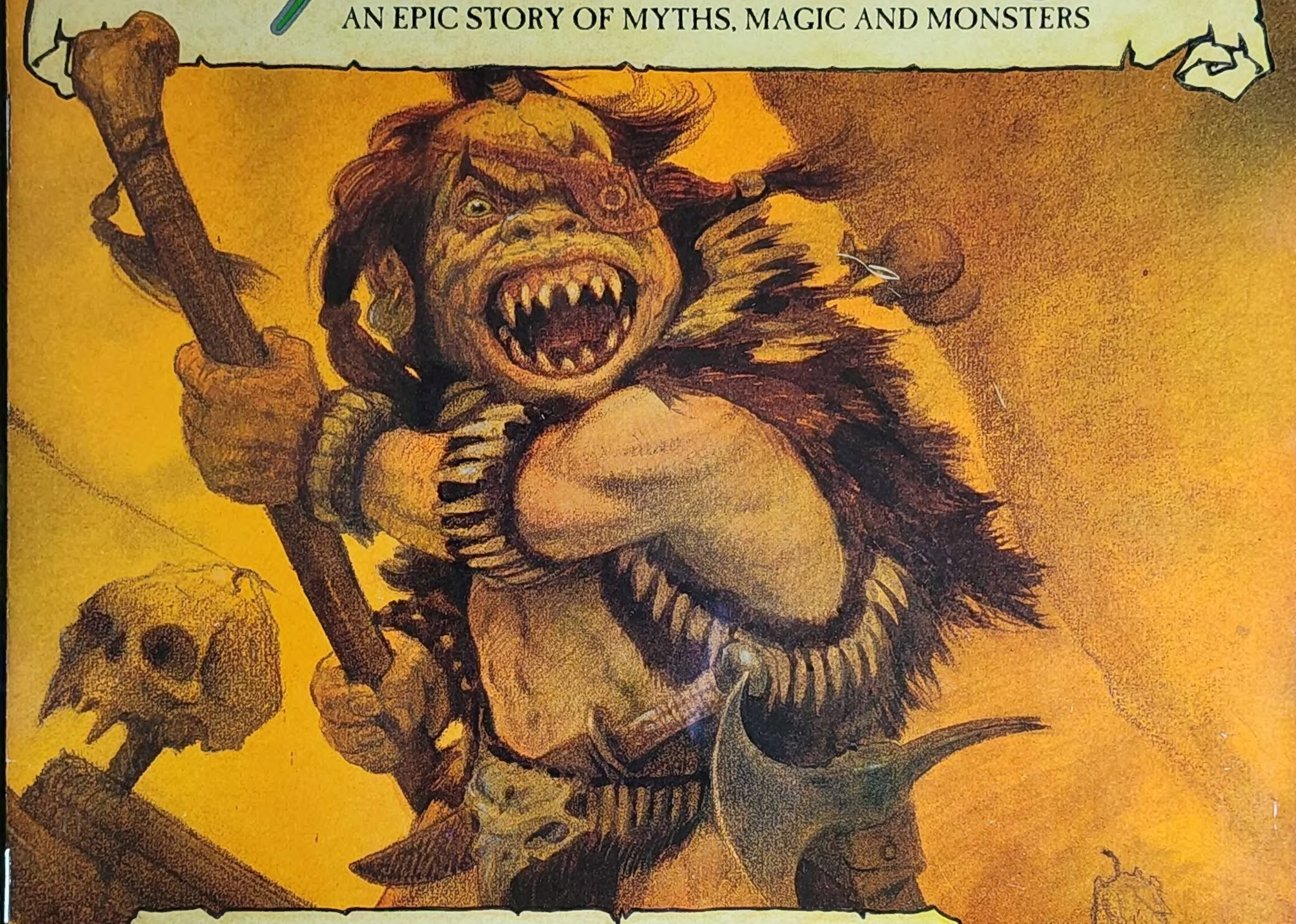
7

IN FORTNIGHTLY PARTS

The Ancestral Trail

AN EPIC STORY OF MYTHS, MAGIC AND MONSTERS



7 Zock, Cannibal Chief

Trapped in the Caves of Flesh-Eating Dwarfs

Julek Heller

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From a story by Frank Graves

On the Seventh Day . . .

Captives bound, caged underground.
Release is found in length around.
A magic beam by evil seen.
Enemies will rise from below,
And dark waters carry the foe.
Prisoner's plight beyond the stern,
Now the slithering monsters turn.
A new deep opens 'ere the burn.

The rough surface of the stalagmite cut into Richard's back. He squirmed uncomfortably against the ropes which held the three companions bound to the pillar in the dimly lit cave. The voices grew closer, then a thick-set dwarf stepped out of the gloom.

"Ha! They're awake," the odd-looking creature scoffed, as a crowd of smaller dwarfs pushed and jostled behind him to get a closer look at the three captives.

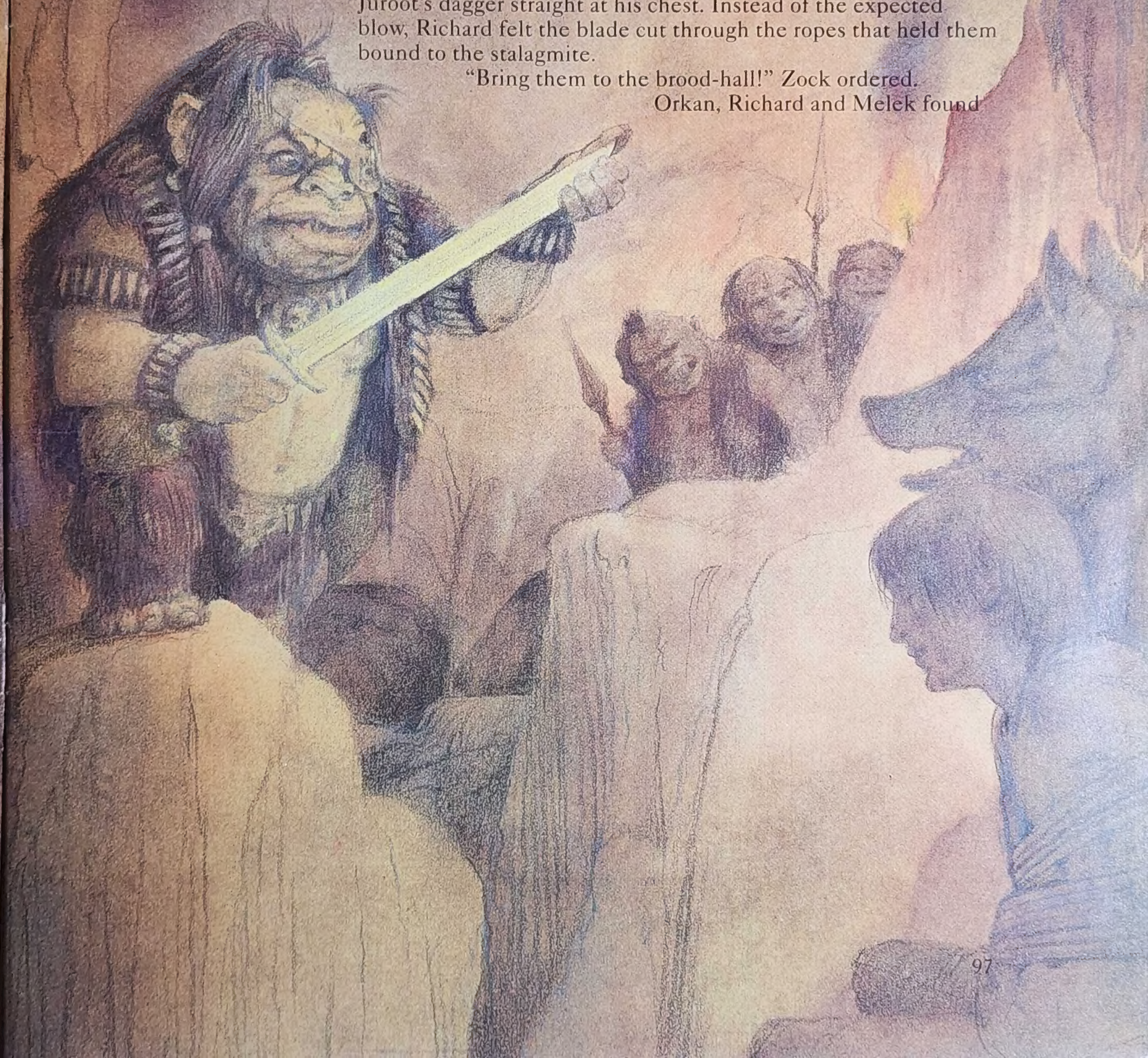
"I am Zock," the dwarf said, "and you are my prisoners."

Doomed to die

Richard gasped in dismay as Zock scuttled forward, aiming Juroot's dagger straight at his chest. Instead of the expected blow, Richard felt the blade cut through the ropes that held them bound to the stalagmite.

"Bring them to the brood-hall!" Zock ordered.

Orkan, Richard and Melek found



themselves surrounded by grinning dwarfs clasping stone knives and heavy, wooden clubs. Richard noticed that some of the dwarfs were carrying Orkan's weapons, making boastful swipes with his sword as they passed it round.

The three stumbled on, through a maze of caves and narrow tunnels, losing all sense of direction. Ahead of them, Zock swaggered through his realm with utter assurance. Every now and then he shouted back at his followers to hurry. They, in turn, closed in to jab their captives with knives, and force them into a jog.

"Do you know who they are?" Richard muttered to his companions.

Bound for the pot

"These are my people," Melek said in a low-pitched voice, "but now they are under the control of the Evil One. I heard that they have become cannibals."

"So why haven't they eaten us yet?" Orkan asked. "Where are they taking us?"

"To the pot, I suppose," Melek replied in a frightened voice.

Further talk was cut off as the dwarfs hustled their uncooked meal into yet another tunnel.

Zock urged them on ever faster, until the trio finally emerged into a vast, domed cavern.

They were astonished at the scene which greeted them. In pride of place stood a tall wooden totem pole, adorned with carved faces whose expressions conveyed both glee and horrible savagery.

Richard noticed that the carved pole was held in great respect. When a dwarf came near it, he placed one hand on his belly and brought the other across his chest to his shoulder in salute.

Around the edge of the cavern were dark openings, each with a bubbling cauldron and a cage at its entrance. Richard was horrified to see that some of the cauldrons were boiling at full blast, with half-cooked limbs dancing lifelessly to the fire's command. First a head, its flesh loosening from the skull, appeared above

the surface, then an arm, firm yet tender, then a leg, boiled to a juicy, brown joint.

At last, Richard recognized the smell he had detected earlier when tied to the stalagmite. It was not the smell of cooking, but that of freshly slaughtered meat, rank and salty. His stomach tightened in automatic revulsion.

With horror, Richard realized they were being dragged to an empty cage by the totem pole. A huge pot simmered hungrily nearby.

Helpless prisoners

Willing hands thrust the three into the cage and slammed the door. The trio felt the cage lift off the floor, and watched helpless as their weapons were placed on a nearby boulder. Zock gave an ugly leer, and summoning a group of his henchmen, stomped out of the brood-hall.

Orkan rattled the door, but it was firmly locked. The bars were made of some tough wood, rigid as iron and bound in a narrow lattice by rock-hard strips of rawhide.

"Well, what do we do now?" Orkan asked.

"We're lucky they didn't take the *Book of Prophecies* when they disarmed us," Melek said, sifting through the pages. "I'll see if it's any help."

Melek read the riddle out in a low voice.

"Well, the first line is clear even to me," he said as he closed the book.

In response, Orkan just slumped to the floor.

Richard thought for a moment, then pointed to the rope looped around Melek's waist.

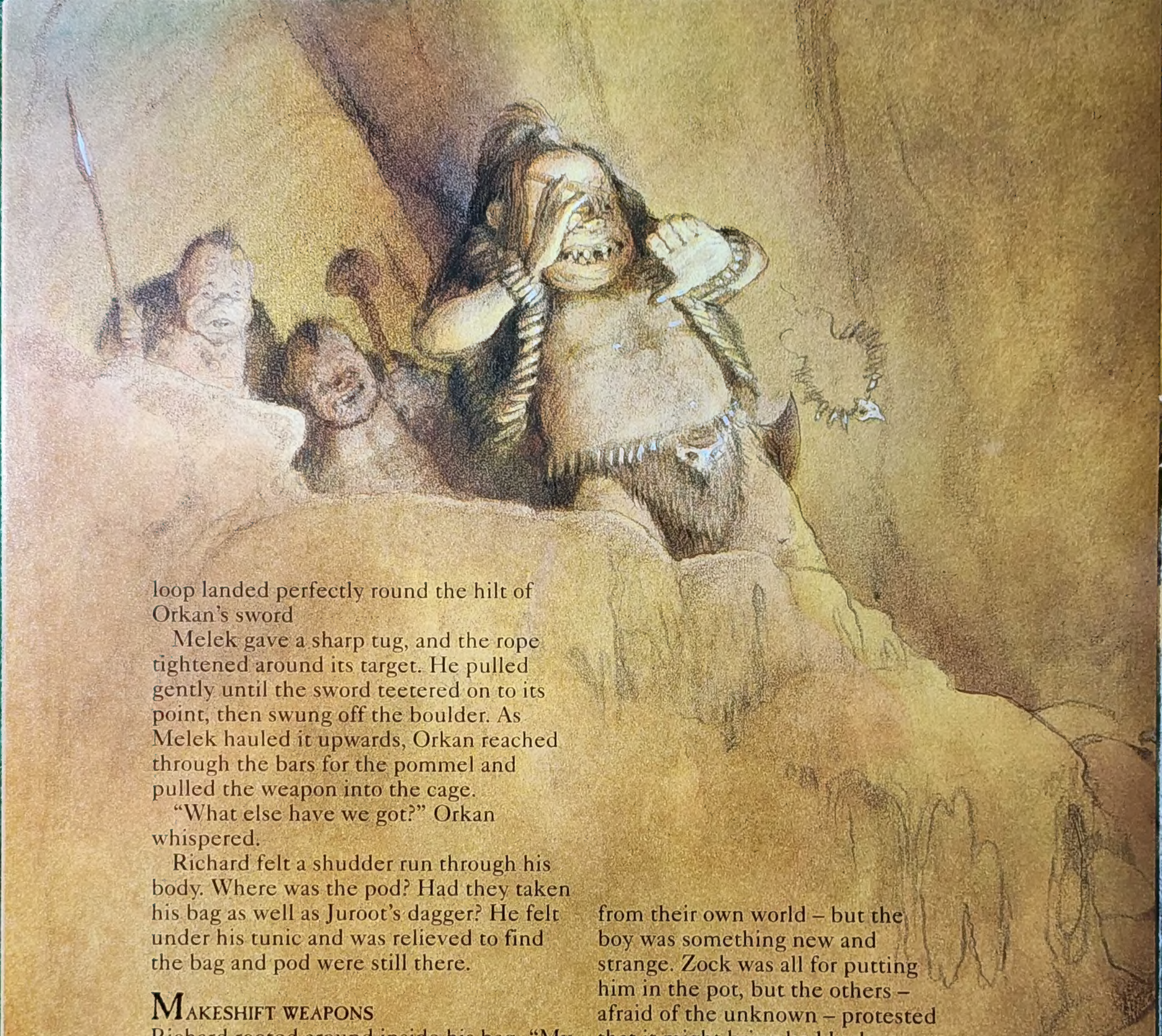
"That's our way out!" Richard exclaimed. "Escape is found in length around! It must mean Melek's rope."

"It's not a rope we need, it's our weapons," Orkan said in exasperation, staring at his sword and bow on the boulder just below their cage.

"Of course," Richard said, "and the rope will get them for us. We'll make a slipknot and haul them in."

"That's not a bad idea!" Orkan said, taking the rope from Melek. With astonishing speed, he fashioned an easy-running slipknot.

"Here, let me do it," Melek said, taking the looped end of the rope and lobbing it underhand towards their weapons. As if by magic, the open



loop landed perfectly round the hilt of Orkan's sword

Melek gave a sharp tug, and the rope tightened around its target. He pulled gently until the sword teetered on to its point, then swung off the boulder. As Melek hauled it upwards, Orkan reached through the bars for the pommel and pulled the weapon into the cage.

"What else have we got?" Orkan whispered.

Richard felt a shudder run through his body. Where was the pod? Had they taken his bag as well as Juroot's dagger? He felt under his tunic and was relieved to find the bag and pod were still there.

Makeshift weapons

Richard rooted around inside his bag. "My torch!" he whispered in surprise. Richard had forgotten about the small flashlight. He clicked it on and off – the batteries still worked.

"What's that?" Melek asked, surprised by the strange light.

"We've got one chance," Richard said, ignoring the question. He brought the others into a huddle and outlined his plan.

Meanwhile, in a nearby cave, Zock and his men were arguing about Richard, and whether or not they should eat him. They recognized Orkan and Melek as creatures from their own world – but the boy was something new and strange. Zock was all for putting him in the pot, but the others – afraid of the unknown – protested that it might bring bad luck.

"Right," Zock raised his hand in final decision, "we eat two now and leave the odd one for later." He led his kinsmen back to the brood-hall. As he approached the cage, the frantic pounding of drums filled the air.

"You," Zock pointed at Richard, "stay there. You two, come out now!"

One of the dwarfs leaped nimbly on to the bars and opened the cage door. He grinned, and grabbed Melek's arm. Quick as lightning, Orkan's sword came to rest at the dwarf's throat. While Orkan disarmed

him, Richard pulled his arms back and tied the rope round his wrists. It was all over in seconds.

For a moment Zock was taken aback, but he quickly recovered his composure.

"What now?" he mocked. "You can't play that trick twice. Get them!" he shouted to his men.

Just then, Richard shone his torch full on Zock's face. The chief reared back, dropping Juroot's dagger. To Zock and his men, the light appeared to be coming from Richard's hand.

"Magic! They're sorcerers!" Zock cried. For the first time, a note of fear came into Zock's voice. "Run!" he bellowed, as he led his men out of the hall.

For a while, Richard, Melek and Orkan stared in surprised delight. Then the three jumped from the cage, dragging their terrified captive with them. Stopping only to grab their weapons, they ran into a brightly-lit tunnel.

It was wide and straight, with an earth floor that had been beaten smooth by countless feet. Flaming torches sputtered along the walls, giving off an oily, sweet-smelling smoke.

A faint rumour of drums drifted through the air, as they hurried along. As if responding to a coded signal, their prisoner began to struggle. Richard shone the torch squarely into the dwarf's crumpled face, and the prisoner stopped squirming.

Richard was trying to think about a course of action when his eye was drawn to an opening on their left. As he squinted to see in the darkness, he sensed Golan calling from inside.

"Down here," Richard cried to the others. As they turned into the tunnel, the steady beat of drums rose higher and higher. Zock was coming for vengeance. The walls of the tunnel were damp and slimy. Rusty stains from exposed iron deposits streaked the rock, but the air was cool and fresh.

Underground lake

"I think we're getting near water," Orkan suggested. Then, rounding a corner, they came upon a vast lake. Before them, hauled halfway up the rocks, were a number of rafts and boats.

"Let's take one," Richard said, heading for a boat big enough to take them and their prisoner.

"What about the monsters in the riddle?" Melek queried. "They could be out there!"

"That's right," Richard said, "but we don't have a choice. Zock will be upon us any minute."

"Wait," Orkan broke in, "you'd better push off the other boats."

Before Richard could unfasten the slimy ropes, he heard angry shouts and the pounding of many feet coming down the tunnel. Orkan and the prisoner were already in the boat. With Melek's help, Richard pushed it on to the lake. As the first water lapped over their shoes, they jumped into the stern. The craft wobbled uncertainly, then settled on an even keel. Richard and Melek each took an oar, and began to row as hard as they could.

WRITHING MASS OF EELS.

"We should have scuttled those boats," Orkan muttered. "Zock can still chase us!"

"There was no time," Richard puffed.

"Pah!" The prisoner spat at Richard, his courage returning at the thought of being rescued. "You'll never get away. Zock will catch you."

The dwarf's words sent a chill down their spines. Melek and Richard increased their efforts, putting all their strength into rowing, straining hard against the rowlocks.

They were a good distance from the shore when their small boat came to a sudden stop.

"What is it?" Richard asked.

"I don't know," Orkan replied from the bow. "I can't see a thing. Hand me your torch."

Richard passed over the torch and Orkan shone its beam over the lake.

"I can't see anything," he said, "try rowing harder."

Richard and Melek hauled desperately at the oars. The boat slid forward a fraction and then stopped.

"Wait!" Orkan cried. "I think I saw something move."

In hot pursuit

As Orkan shone the torch down into the water, a narrow set of jaws rose out of the darkness and fastened on his arm. Orkan jumped back just in time, losing only a shred of his sleeve. In the beam of the torchlight, they could see a mass of squirming grey eels, each as thick as a man's thigh, and each ending in a vicious sharp-toothed snout.

As they stared wide-eyed into the teeming waters, Zock's men appeared across the lake and boarded the boats and rafts. Zock was coming towards them, in a shallow boat illuminated at either end by flickering candles held by shiny skulls. As the dwarfs came closer,

hoarse bellows of triumph echoed from the lake's surface to the roof high above.

Orkan moved fast. He grabbed their prisoner and with one supple movement, raised the dwarf above his head. Before Richard or Melek could say a word, Orkan had flung the dwarf into the water.

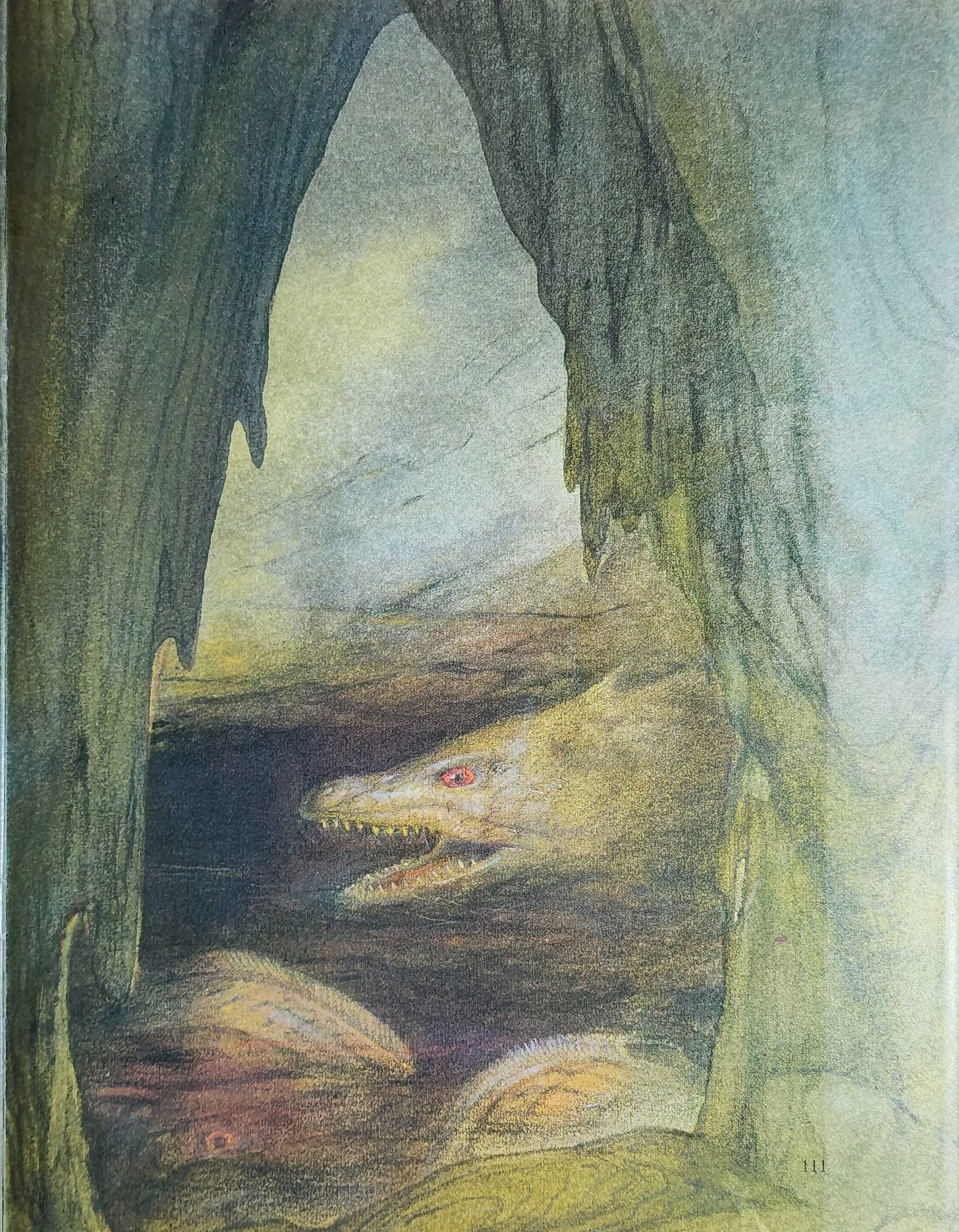
A NARROW ESCAPE

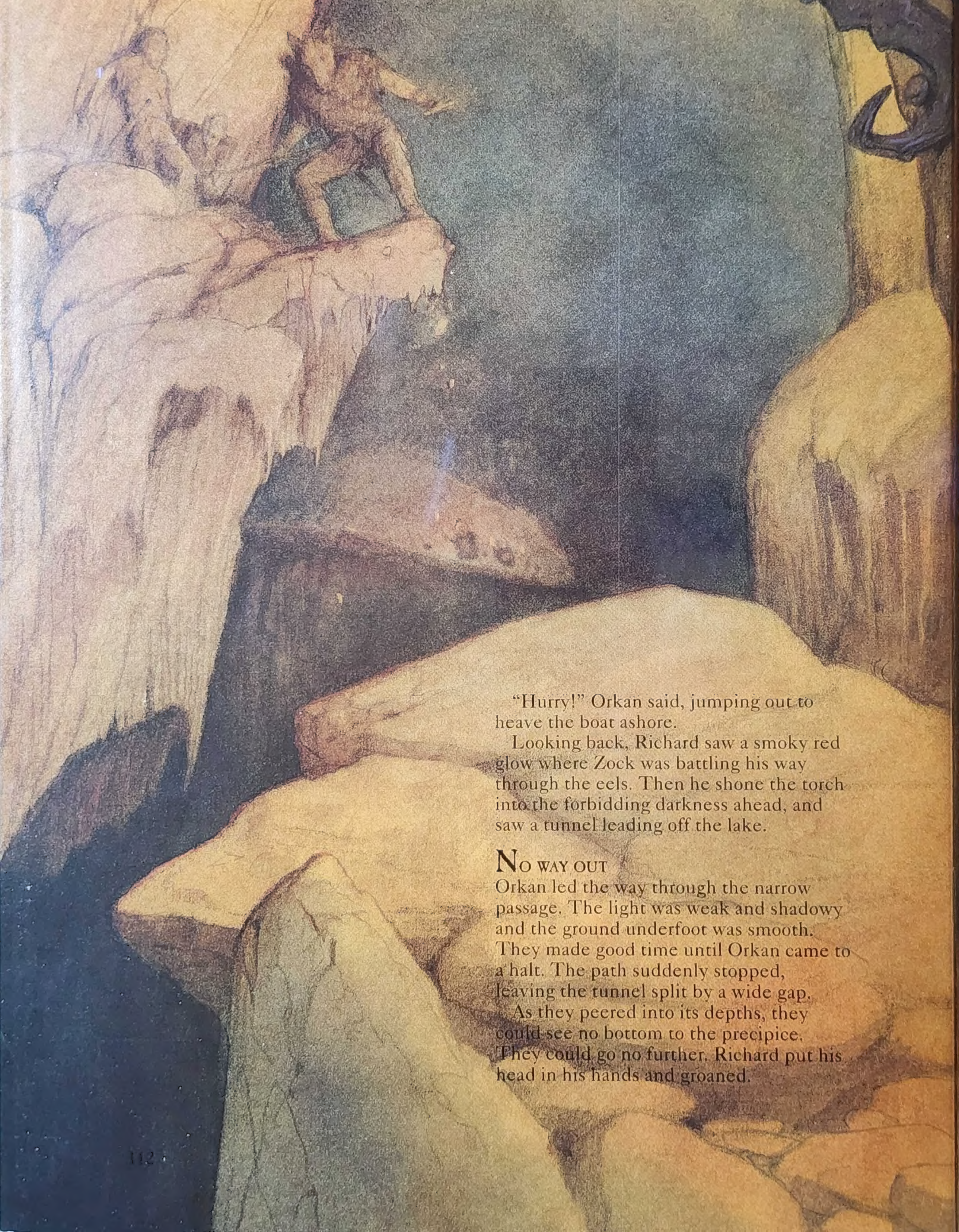
Zock's boat was only a short distance away, and in the light of the burning candles, both groups could see the eels surge back towards the dwarf.

"Now the slithering monsters turn," Orkan grinned, quoting from the riddle. "Let's go."

Its course now free, the boat leaped forward as Richard and Orkan grabbed the oars and started pulling. Before long, they were well ahead of Zock's warriors, who were blocked by the eels.

They splashed noisily across the lake, caution thrown to the wind, until they hit the opposite bank.





"Hurry!" Orkan said, jumping out to heave the boat ashore.

Looking back, Richard saw a smoky red glow where Zock was battling his way through the eels. Then he shone the torch into the forbidding darkness ahead, and saw a tunnel leading off the lake.

No way out

Orkan led the way through the narrow passage. The light was weak and shadowy and the ground underfoot was smooth. They made good time until Orkan came to a halt. The path suddenly stopped, leaving the tunnel split by a wide gap.

As they peered into its depths, they could see no bottom to the precipice. They could go no further. Richard put his head in his hands and groaned.

Shoomi's Sanctuary

Come into this ancient domain and use your powers of observation to find . . .

Shoomi and Shoobi

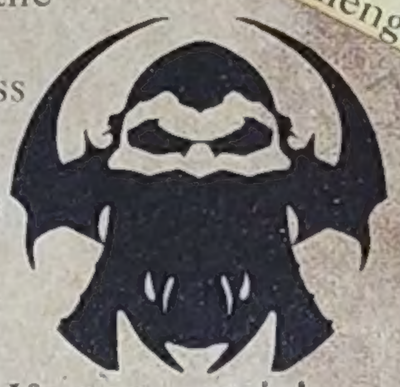
These friendly creatures are still close on our heroes' trail. Watch out for them again as you make your way through Zock's territory.

In issue 6, Shoomi and Shoobi avoided the Cozards and Killer Bees by remaining on the inside front cover.

Mask of Evil

3-Minute Challenge

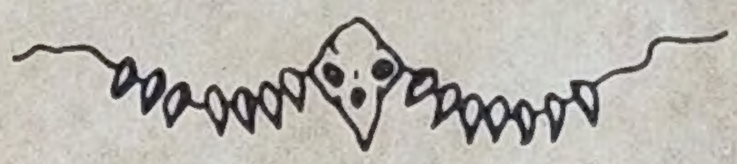
Can you find a fragment of the Evil One's mask hidden in one of the illustrations in less than three minutes?



In issue 6, the fragment was on page 95. The faces were hidden amongst the trees on pages 84-85.

Did you beat the challenge? If not, try again!

Zock's Pendant



In all the commotion caused by the trio's escape, Zock failed to notice that his pendant fell from his neck. Can you find it in one of the illustrations after page 102?

Monsters and Magic

Read about Cannibal Zim and Baba Yaga on Morbane's cards. Which of these characters do you think Zock is based on?

In issue 6, the Speaking Oak was based on the Green Man.

Check your answers in the next issue.

Puzzle Map

Cut out the next three puzzle pieces and fit them on to your Ancestral World map poster.

Power of Evil

Cut out the letter blocks and wait for the clue that will help you form the letters into a phrase revealing the source of the Evil One's power.

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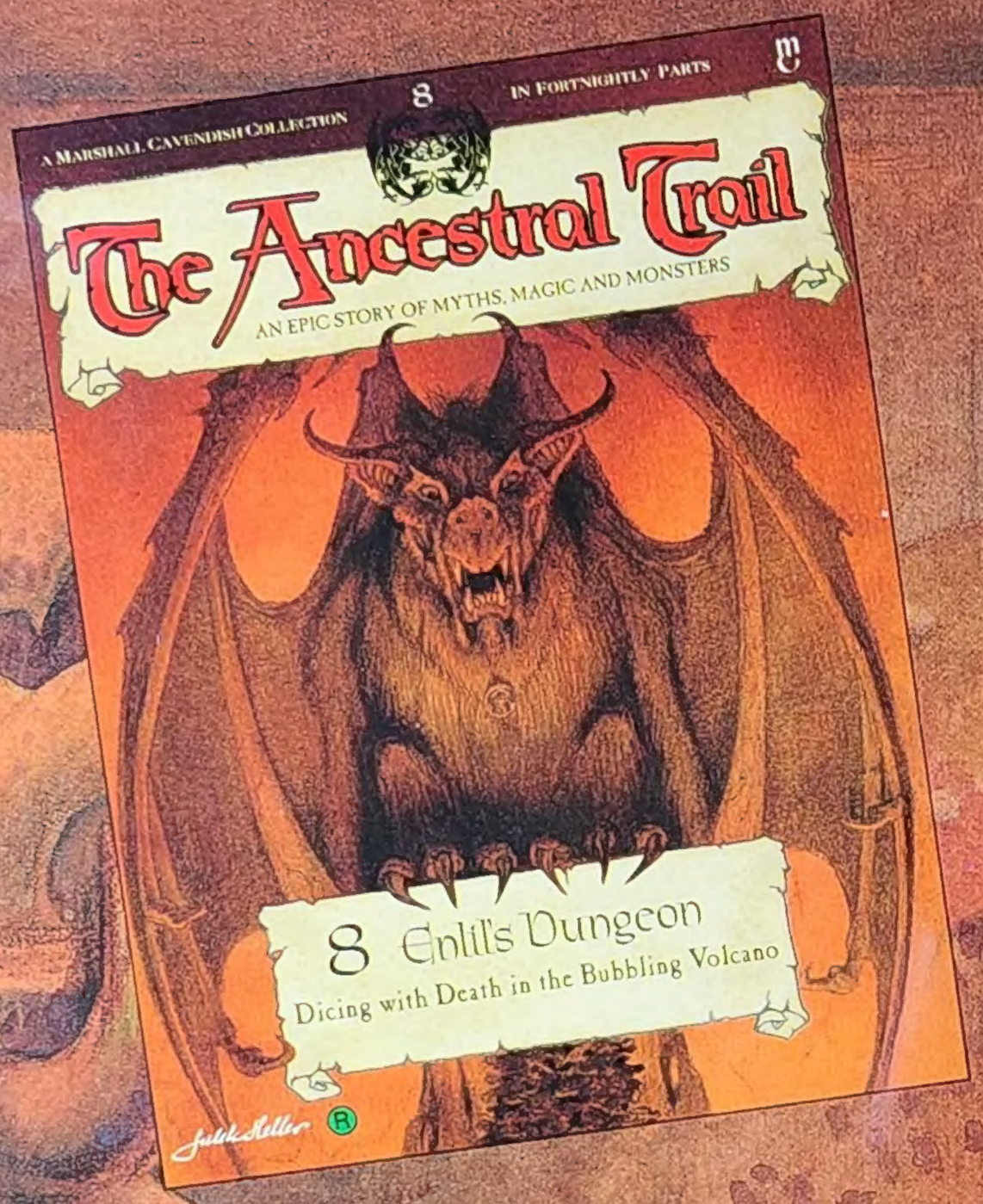
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Dicing with Death in the Bubbling Volcano

In Issue 8

Enlil's Dungeon

The three companions trick their way past vicious guards and into the heart of a bubbling volcano. Will they find it so easy to retrieve the pod and escape from the evil bat's fiery domain?

plus

- Morbane tells us about Cerberus and how he guards the gates of hell, and takes a look at a fire-breathing giant.

- Locator cards and tokens for **The Ancestral Trail** role-playing game.

FREE

6 Monster Might cards to complete **The Ancestral Trail** pack.

Coming in Issue 9

Living Death-Traps

The horrifying secrets of the Dead Wood reveal themselves to our heroes as they make their way through treacherous territory.

plus

Morbane looks at plants that are not all they seem – one brings forgetfulness, another can kill • A puzzle piece • Location recorder.

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